

**PRIVATE LANDOWNER FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY
DECEMBER 11, 2007; RICHMOND, VIRGINIA**

GROUP PROFILE

The Private Landowner focus group was held on December 11, 2007, in Richmond, VA, as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately thirty-seven people were invited to attend this focus group meeting. . Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in their community. Eleven landowners attended the meeting; eight were men, three were women, and all were white. Participants owned a variety of land-types from pine farm forest to family farm and residential property. One participant owned several thousand acres of farm and forest land. Others had smaller tracts from approximately ten acres to several hundred acres.

Several participants identified themselves as being hunters. Several of those were bow hunters and a few were former hound hunters. Some individuals also identified themselves as non-hunters who are also supportive of hunting. Some participants indicated that they allow hunters to access their property for hunting through leases or other agreements.

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

The focus group was conducted for approximately two hours. During that time, participants responded to a series of questions posed by the facilitator (in bold, below). A summary of responses is provided below, including direct quotes from meeting participants that help to illustrate any common themes or key points from the discussion.

In the area where you own land, have you seen any changes over the last 10 years in availability of lands for hunting with hounds? If you have seen changes, were they related to changes in land ownership, changes in attitudes of land owners, a combination of the two, or other factors?

Participants indicated that they have seen several changes in the landscape where they own property including higher land values, breaking up of family farms, landowners with different values moving in, and more fences are being built. Participants noted that the fragmentation of land and changes in attitudes of landowners have caused conflicts between private landowners and non-hound hunters and hound hunters. Participants indicated that hunters in some areas continue to use property, despite changes in ownership, because it's the place they've always hunted.

"Land values have gone up so high. Just in the last few years, we're talking, I've seen assessments in King and Queen County, go up ten times in the last year. You know, we've seen

our property appreciate. So more and more people are selling their land, dividing their land so there are more people moving in.”

“Well, it’s defiantly built up with the farms being sold and split up....I was told face to face by a hunter that I’ve hunted this land my whole life and I’m going to continue to hunt it. And I told him you could have bought the land when it was for sale and he said, ‘I didn’t need to.’”

“Fragmentation, land being sold—broken up or sold to new owners who don’t have the same traditional hunting values that other people do, whether it’s with hounds or without, ah, has resulted in, in my opinion, ah, different objectives. You see people that are birdwatchers that aren’t hunters that own property; you see people that are still hunters that may not have as much property as the neighbor has, ah, with different objectives.”

“We have folks moving in that are not accustomed to our country living. There’s some urbanization coming in and, you know, they like seeing the cows in the field; don’t like smelling cow manure.”

Have your experiences as a landowner dealing with hunters been mostly positive, mostly negative, or somewhere in between? If you have had negative experiences, please describe the problems you most often encounter, including any problems that are specific to hunting with hounds.

Participants indicated that they have had both positive and negative interactions with hound hunters. Some participants noted that they have had a positive relationship with a neighboring hunt clubs that use hounds. Many participants recounted less constructive interactions including confrontations with hunters, abuse of the right-to-retrieve law, being nearly shot at, livestock harassment, disrupted hunts, and problems with hunters interfering with traffic. Participants acknowledged that the problems they have encountered have been the result of a few hunters who, individually, have acted poorly. Participants also recognized that hound hunters serve an important role in controlling deer populations and do make a positive contribution to the community, raising money for local charities.

“There’s small parcels of property are adjacent to me that are able to be hunted by the hunt club, or the dog hound club. It’s nothing more than a means of access to release the dogs on this property knowing full well they’ll run through mine and then have an access on...the other boundary in which to kill the deer so, even though they’re not hunting on me, the whole time the dogs are running through my property....They’re using the dogs as an arm’s length means of trespass, quite frankly is the way I feel it’s been handled.”

“They’ll let the dogs out on this road—there is no property between that road and this road that they have any—there’s no hunting allowed besides the property owners themselves. They have no allowed anybody on the road. There is no reason for them to let the dogs out there, other than you’ll see them down the road. They’re lined up on the road with guns over the hood or their car or their rifles, or their shot guns, or whatever. So it’s just blatant disregard.”

“We’ve got two Shetland ponies and a horse and one of the dogs was going after them so, we called him and we said, ‘You need to come get these dogs; they’re bothering the animals.’ And he said, ‘I suggest you all learn to live with them and leave them alone. They’ll come home when they’re ready to come home.’”

“You can spend a good bit of time on the ten percent, you know, the bad guys that are out there.”

“I’d be in my kitchen fixing breakfast and I’d say to my husband, ‘Who’s that?’ They just drive their trucks up, drive straight across the field, go across to the woods. ‘Oh, we’re retrieving our dogs.’ No you’re not. You don’t bring a vehicle on our property.”

“And that exception for dog retrieval is the main thing that’s got me vexed, to be honest with you. ‘Cause that has been abused in so many circumstances. I’ve had, you know, twelve-year-old kids that are driving ATVs across the property just having fun. When you stop ‘em and catch ‘em, the first thing they say is, ‘I’m looking for my dog,’ ‘Cause they’ve been taught that from day one.”

“We can’t even take a horse on a trail that we’ve got around our property. We can’t walk the dogs. Once hunting season starts, that’s over. Our property’s not ours anymore. We can stay around our house, maybe, that’s it. Except for Sunday, and Sunday you hope they’ll abide by the law, so you can actually go on your own property.”

“Lot of hunt clubs do a lot of good. They have fundraiser for people who have been injured in their communities, you know, across the state, they raise money for that.”

How were the problems you encountered resolved? Were you able to work out problems with hunters? Did you call for help from VDGIF law enforcement? Was the help you received from law enforcement adequate? If not, how could it be improved?

Although some participants seemed to be able to work out problems they were having, many seemed to be facing ongoing issues. Participants described having posted property, taken legal action, armed themselves, set up trail cameras to catch trespassers, and called hunters about dogs on the property. Participants indicated that because of the remote nature of where they live, the number of law enforcement officials available, and the loopholes in existing regulations, there was limited success in resolving issues by calling law enforcement.

“My biggest fear is, you know, we’re going to come up with some solutions so that we can allow hound hunting and you’re going to have those people that have created this situation and they’re going to ignore the new regulations too and I don’t know; we’re going to have to start a law enforcement fund and get some more guys in green Tahoes out there.”

“Right now the law enforcement guys don’t have the tools, right? I mean, there aren’t the regulations there to enforce. I mean, there’s an exception to the trespass law, right? Which is abused left and right, I mean, you know.”

“I don’t feel adequately safe on my property when I’m out in the middle of the summer, you know, planting a field or doing something without a concealed carry. I just don’t feel comfortable.”

“We have some drug problems in our rural county in certain areas on the other side of the county, you know, and they’re busy, ok? They’re busy dealing with that and that’s the higher priority. The stuff we’re dealing with is occasional and then by the time that they know too, I guess, you know they don’t really patrol out in our area, so by the time they get out there its responding to a call and it’s a little bit too late, usually.”

“It was like the different [law enforcement officials] that would come to the house, they weren’t all reading the same regulation books.”

What do you believe to be the most important issues that need to be addressed in this review of the issues surrounding hunting with hounds?

Participants indicated that the most pressing issues, from their perspective, would include trespassing, the right-to-retrieve law, hounds running out of season, abandoned dogs, and hound hunting in more densely populated areas.

“Our local paper ran an article last year at the beginning of hunting season about the overloading of the county dog pound after hunting season was over. And, I can’t tell you—I have a room in my house, it’s a mud room where I keep my dogs—and I can’t tell you how many times hunting dogs have been sleeping on my porch and my dogs are tearing apart my house to get to those hunting dogs. And, you know, you can call them and they might come to get them the next day.”

“First and foremost, I think, is that trespass law.”

“I’d say the trespass law, and you cannot have the hounds running during archery, muzzleloader, spring gobbler. And I’m sorry that’s going to keep the fox hounds out of the woods, but that’s a loophole that needs to be closed.”

What do you think is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues (explore one issue at a time, choosing the 2 or 3 issues that surface most often)?

Participants identified several potential solutions including minimum acreage requirements, tougher penalties for repeat violators, requiring that hunt clubs be licensed, self-policing of ‘bad apples’, having additional law enforcement, and additional education targeted at hound hunters.

“When you have a repeated violator, that the laws get tougher.”

“I don’t know, hunting clubs, would there be any value in licensing hunting clubs where, there’s a board within the hunting club that, you know, it would be able to, you know, legally get rid of the violators. Identify those people so they can’t go join another club.”

“I’d like to see, especially, that if you trespass on posted property with a firearm, that that would be considered a felony. That would take care of a LOT of the problem.”

“The deer circle is no smaller now than it was fifty years ago. And, there’s no way that you could ever feasible say...that if you have fifty acres of land, that you could—and I have land beside you—that you should be able to turn fifty walker hounds loose on it and have twenty-five people hunting on that property, especially if you have one on each side of the property that does not allow hunting, ah, because it’s nothing more than a tool, a means to an end to push deer from one side to the other through an extension of trespass. So, I would like to see, if it’s feasible, an acreage restriction with yearly permit.”

“In defense of these [conservation police officers], looking at the web site, there are a ton of openings. They probably need a raise, there probably wouldn’t be so many openings.”

“I think with the exception of the trespass law for dog retrieval, I think a reasonable compromise there would be the landowner posts their property and puts contact information on the sign, that exception should not apply to that landowner. I don’t see any reason that a dog owner should be able to violate property rights to retrieve a dog if he has contact information to talk to the owner.”

“Training. I think maybe some training courses starting with the hunter education program. That the dog part of it be included in that. Or that there would be an online training—computer training—system that dog owners have to take. Possibly even license the dog owners and that, if they have so many offences, take their license.”

Do you believe that any of the laws and regulations that govern hunting should be changed to address the problems you have encountered? If so, how?

Although this question was not directly asked of participants, it was addressed by them over the course of the discussion. Participants repeatedly indicated that they would like to see changes to the right-to-retrieve law, tougher trespass penalties, and restrictions on hound hunting in counties with highly fragmented landscapes and restrictions on hound hunting to alleviate conflicts with other hunters.

“Perhaps there could be a training season for the deer and fox hounds, outside of those seasons [muzzleloader, archery, and spring gobbler]. I think that might—because there is none—you know, somebody had mentioned—other than the general firearms season, there is no time for the deer hound guys.”

“Well, there’s a couple ways to skin that cat. One is a minimum acreage or minimum contiguous acreage, as you say, but another one, like he says, is simply a county by county basis. How

fragmented is the land in this county. When the fragmentation exceeds a certain level, then that county is no longer open to [hunting with hounds].”

Are there any other important issues that this group should discuss?

One participant asked if deer-vehicle collisions increase as a result of hound hunting, because the hounds run the deer across the road. There was some discussion about the difference between states with and without hound hunting and counties with and without hound hunting in Virginia. Participants noted that insurance rates are not significantly different between hound hunting and non-hound hunting states.

“I was wondering, I don’t know if I’ve read something before, but, it always seems like there’s more and more car accidents with deer during hunting season and I also know its mating season around the same time frame. Has anyone ever looked at those statistics?”

Another participant asked, of the hunters and former hound hunters in the group, if it was easier to kill a deer if you used hounds to hunt it. There was some discussion about different methods of hunting. One participant recounted how the companionship with his dog was so important to him, noting that the hunt is really the experience, not the kill, which includes the enjoyment of being with the dogs, much in the same way other people feel about their house pets. Participants also discussed why hound hunting differs on the western and eastern parts of Virginia.

“Why does a guy hunt with a hound, or any dog?...I could spend all day long and not see a turkey. The companionship I’ll have with that dog is why I’m out there; for the most part....The hunt is the experience that you’re having. And the companionship that you have with your dogs, whether it’s a hound running a deer or a fox, that’s something that you enjoy as much.”

One participant noted that the focus group meeting was very helpful for her, especially having been able to discuss issues with other landowners, several of whom were hunters. In response, another participant apologized to several of the landowners in the room, on behalf of all hunters, for the difficulties they have experienced.

“I’m just really impressed with this whole thing tonight because with the exception of the three of us, I think, or the four of us who are not hunters, the way they’ve presented everything and actually talked about both sides of it. I just think that’s really good.”

“I’ll speak for all of us. I apologize for the things that you guys have had to put up with....The tolerance you’ve shown by not killing the guys is amazing. What you’ve put up with is not right. And it’s not something that you should have to put up with. It’s your land.”

SUMMARY

Private landowners in this focus group represented a good cross-section of the types of private landowners in Virginia. Some participants owned large tracts; others had smaller, more residential properties in rural areas. Some participants purchased their land in order to have horses or livestock; others purchased their land to hunt on. Some participants were hunters, including some that had hound hunted, while others were not hunters. All participants noted changes in the landownership in their area, identifying increased fragmentation of land as a more recent phenomenon, one that likely has contributed to increased hound hunting conflicts. Many participants indicated that the attitude of landowners has changed; landowners are less supportive of hound hunting as individual properties get smaller and also with an influx of residents who are not familiar with the hound hunting tradition. The central issues for landowners in this focus group were the right-to-retrieve law and trespassing. Although participants acknowledged that problems are caused by a few bad players in the hound hunting community, most felt that changes to existing laws, new regulations, and better educational programs are needed to help reduce landowner-hound hunter and hound and non-hound hunter conflicts.